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# THE LOTUS MAGAZINE

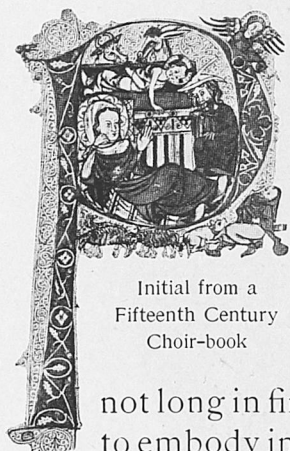
Volume VII

DECEMBER, 1915

Number 3

## THE CHRISTMAS CAROL

ITS EVOLUTION FROM MONKISH LATIN INTO THE TONGUES OF EUROPE



Initial from a  
Fifteenth Century  
Choir-book

ERVADING the Christmas season is song—the carol. As a Christian festival, Christmas had its beginning at the middle of the fourth century in Rome. The new feast was not long in finding a hymn-writer to embody in immortal Latin the emotions called forth by the memory of the Nativity. “Veni redemptor gentium” (Come, World’s Redeemer) is one of the earliest of Latin hymns—one of the few that have come down from the father of Church song, Ambrose, Archbishop of Milan (d. 397). Great as theologian and statesman, Ambrose was great also as a poet and systematizer of Church music. “Veni, redemptor gentium” is above all things stately and severe. It is the theological aspect alone of Christmas, the redemption of sinful man by the mystery of the Incarnation, and the miracle of the Virgin Birth. There is no feeling for the human pathos and poetry of the scene at Bethlehem in “Veni redemptor gentium.”

Another fine hymn is of slightly later date. “Corde natus ex Parentis (Of the Father’s Love Begotten) is a canto from a hymn by the Spanish poet Prudentius (about 348-413). But again the note is purely theological, the Incarnation as a world-event is its theme. It sings the birth of Him who is “Corde natus ex Parentes Ante Mundi exordium Alpha et Omega cognominatus.”

Other early hymns are “A solis ortus cardine” (From East to West, From Shore to Shore) still sung by the church at Lauds on Christmas Day, and “Jesu, redemptor omnium” (sixth century), the fast hymn at Christmas Vespers. Like the poems of Ambrose and Prudentius, they are doctrinal rather than humanly tender.

In the ninth and tenth centuries arose a new form of hymnody, the Prose or Sequence, sung after the Gradual. The earliest writer of sequences was a monk of an abbey near the Lake of Constance. The most famous Nativity sequence, however, is the “Laetabundus, exsulet fidelis chorus” of St. Bernard of Clair-Vaux (d. 1153), once sung over all Europe, and especially popular in England and

France. Here are its opening lines translated into English:

Come rejoicing,  
Faithful men, with rapture singing  
Alleluya!  
Monarch's monarch,  
From a holy maiden springing,  
Mighty wonder!

If we consider the Latin Christmas hymns from the fourth century to the thirteenth, we shall find that, however much they differ in form, they have one common characteristic: they are essentially theological. There is little attempt to imagine the scene in the stable at Bethlehem, little interest in the Child as a child, little sense of the human pathos of the Nativity. The explanation is, I think, very simple. This poetry was the poetry of monks, or of men imbued with the monastic spirit.

Yet Christmas was, as it has remained, a feast of material good things, a time for the fulfilment of traditional heathen usages, rather than a joyous celebration of the Saviour's birth. And so it is noteworthy that the earliest of vernacular Christmas carols known, the early thirteenth century Anglo-Norman "*Seignors, ore entendez à nons,*" is a song not of religion but of revelry. Its last verse is typical:

Lords, by Christmas and the host  
Of this mansion hear my toast—  
Drink it well—  
Each must drink his cup of wine,  
And I the first will toss off mine:  
Here then I put you all Wassail,  
Cursed be he who will not say,  
"Drinkhail!"

With St. Francis of Assisi begins that "carol spirit" which is the most winning part of the Christian Christmas, the spirit which, while not for-

getting the divine side of the Nativity, yet delights in its simple humanity, the spirit that links the Incarnation to the common life of the people, that brings human tenderness into the relation. Love to men, the sons of human brotherhood—that was the great thing which St. Francis brought home to his age. The message, certainly, was not new, but he realized it with infectious intensity.

It is in the poetry of Jacopone da Todi, born shortly after the death of St. Francis, that the Franciscan Christmas spirit finds its most intense expression. An impassioned poet, and a soaring mystic, Jacopone is one of the greatest of Christian singers, unpolished as his verses are. His "*Veggiamo il Bambino*" is a picture in words, of the Madonna and her Child, that might well have inspired any early Tuscan artist:

Come and look upon her child  
Nestling in the hay!  
See his arms opened wide,  
On her lap to play!  
And she takes him by her side,  
Cloaks him as she may.

There have been few more rapturous poets than Jacopone; men deemed him mad; but, "if he is mad" says a modern Italian writer, "he is mad as a lark." (*S'e pazzo, e pazzo come l'allodola*).

To him is attributed that most poignant of Latin hymns, the "*Stabat Mater dolorosa*." He also wrote a joyous Christmas pendant to it:

Full of beauty stood the Mother,  
By the manger, blest o'er other,  
Where her little one she lays.  
For her inmost soul's elation,  
In its fervid jubilation,  
Thrills with ecstasy of praise.

While this was going on in Italy, Germany too was developing its secular Christmas chant.

One of the earliest of German Christmas carols, "Es Kourt ein schif geladen," is the work of Eckhart's disciple, John Tauler (d. 1361). It is the adaptation of a secular song:

A ship comes sailing  
onwards  
With a precious  
freight on board;  
It bears the only  
Son of God  
It bears the Eternal  
Word.

To the fourteenth century may perhaps belong the exquisite allegorical carol still sung by both Catholic and Protestant Germany:

The soft Rose is  
blowing,  
Sprung from a  
dainty root,  
Of ancient seer's  
foreshowing,  
Of Jesse's pro-  
mised fruit;  
Its fairest bud un-  
folds to light  
Amid the cold, cold winter,  
And in the dark midnight.

The fifteenth century produced a realistic type of German carol. It tells

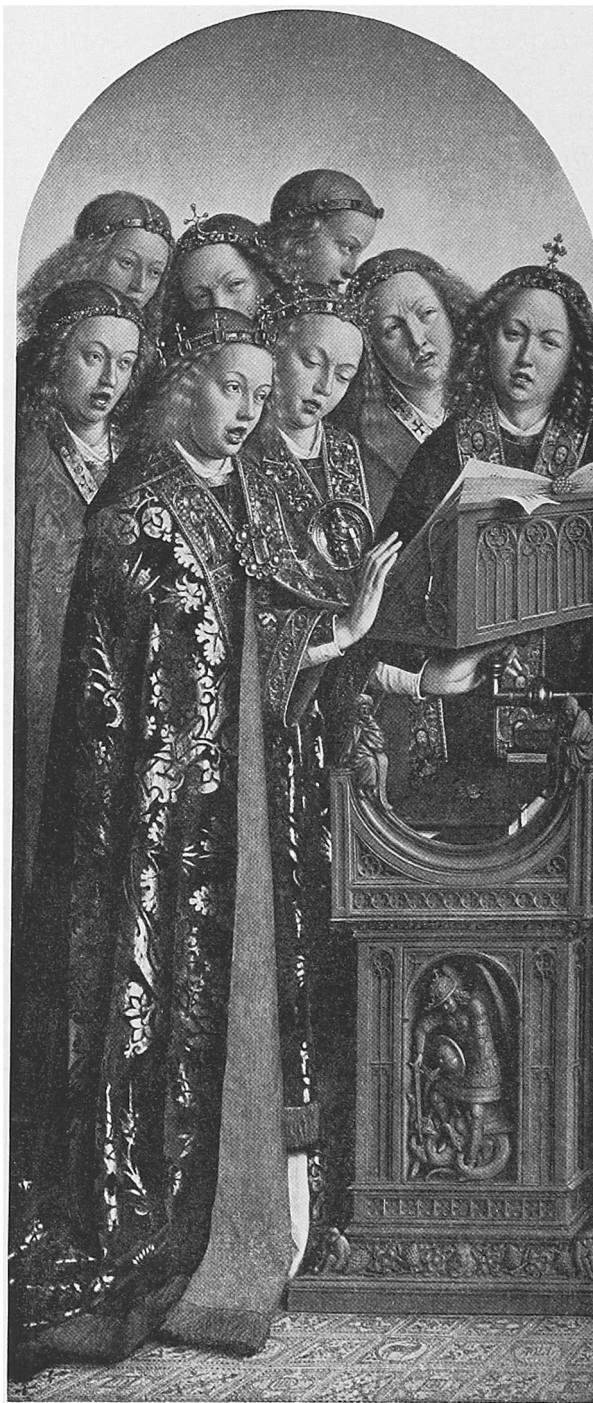
in naive language the story of the wanderings of the Holy Family during the

Flight into Egypt. This carol type lasted and continued to develop in Austria and the Catholic parts of Germany through the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and even into the nineteenth. In Carinthia in the early nineteenth century, almost every parish had its local poet, who added new songs to the old treasure. Particularly popular were the *Hirtenlieder* or shepherd songs, in which the peasant worshippers compared themselves with the shepherds of Bethlehem.

Even when these carols are of the most rustic character and in the broadest dialect, they breathe forth a great kindness and sense of the human. Thus:

"The Child is  
laid in the crib, so hearty and so  
rare!

My little Hans would be nothing by  
His side, were he finer than he is.



Singing Angels. By Van Eyck

Coal-black as cherries are His eyes,  
The rest of Him is white as chalk.  
His pretty hands are delicate and  
tender. I touched Him carefully.  
Then He gave me a smile and a deep  
sigh too.

If you were mine, thought I, you'd  
grow a merry boy.

At home in the kitchen I'd comfort-  
ably house you;

Out here in the stable the cold wind  
comes in at every corner."

In the modern English sense, a carol may be defined as a religious song, less formal and solemn than the ordinary church hymn. It is an expression of popular and naive devotional feeling, intended to be sung outside rather than within church walls. There even still linger about it echoes of its original meaning. For "carol" in twelfth century France used to describe the amorous song-dance which hailed the coming of Spring. In Italian it meant a ring, or song-dance; while by English writers from the thirteenth to the sixteenth century it was used chiefly to sing when dancing, and had no necessary connection with religion. Much as the mediæval Church with its ascetic tendencies, disliked religious dancing, it could not always suppress it; and in Germany, there was choral dancing at Christmas round the cradle of the Christ Child, as there still is in remote parishes in Spain.

In very early English carols the then dominant feudal idea finds expression in lines such as these:

Mary is quene of alle thinge;  
And her sone a lovely kinge.  
God graunt us alle good endinge!  
Often the religious spirit almost van-

ishes, and the carol becomes little more than a gay pastoral song:

The Shepherd upon a hill he sate;  
He had on him his tabard and his hat,  
His tarbox, his pipe, and his flagat;  
His name was called Joly, Joly Wat,  
For he was a gud herdes boy ut hoy!  
For in his pipe he made so much joy.

In France the true Noël begins to appear in the fifteenth century manuscripts, but it was not till the following century that it attained its fullest vogue and was spread all over the country by the printing presses.

Some of the early Noël's are not unlike the English carols of the period, and are often half in Latin, half in French. Here are two lines from one of these "macaronic" carols:

Celebrons la naissance  
Nostri Salvatoris.

In the early French carols Lucas le Moigne represents the esprit gaulois, the spirit that is often called "Rabelaisian," though it is only one side of the genius of Rabelais. The good Curé was a contemporary of the author of "Pantagruel." His "Chansons de Noël's Nouvalx" was published in 1520 and contains carols in very varied styles, some naive and pious, others hardly quotable at the present day. One of his best known pieces is a dialogue between the Virgin and the singers of the carol. Mary is asked and answers questions about the wondrous happenings of her life. Here are lines about the Nativity:

Q. Or nous dites, Marie,  
Les neuf mois accomplis,  
Naquit le fruit de vie,  
Comme l'Ange avoit dit?

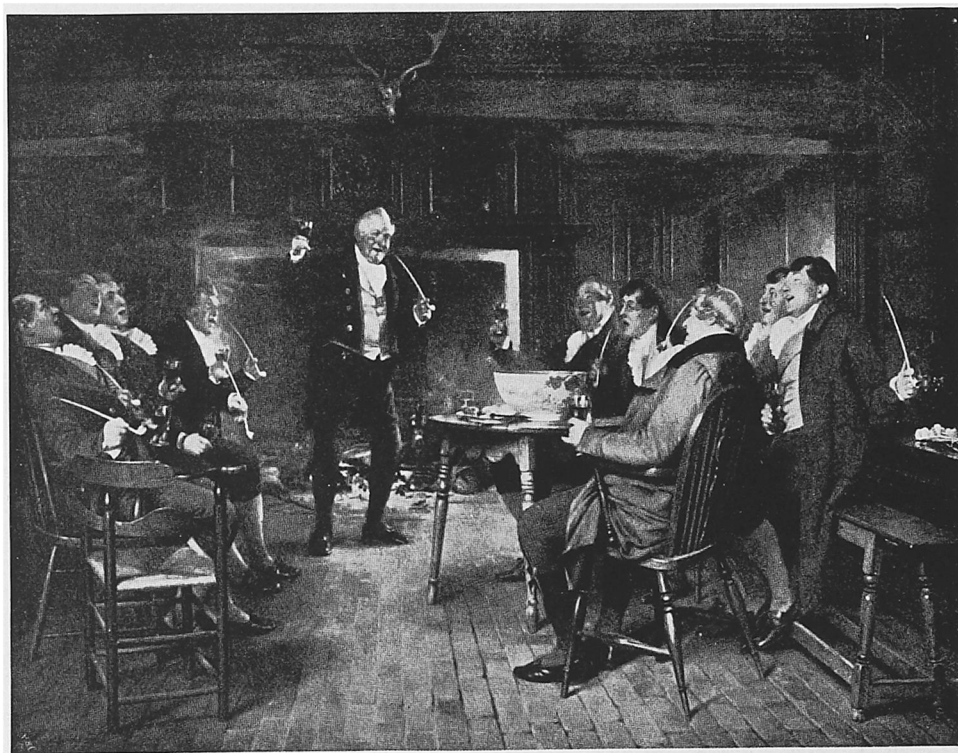


A. Oui, sans nullepeine  
Et sans oppression,  
Naquit de tout le monde,  
La vraie Redemption.

There is a large class of French Noëls which make the Nativity more real, more present, by representing the singer as one of the company of worshippers going to adore the child. Often these are shepherds, but some-

inhabitants are said to be so given over to lawsuits that they can hardly find time to go to Bethlehem.

The most remarkable of the patois Noëlists of the seventeenth century are the Provençal Saloly and the Burgundian la Monnoye, the one kindly and tender, the other witty and sarcastic. Here is a translation of one of the latter's satirical verses :



“ God Rest Ye Merrie Gentlemen ”

times they are simply the inhabitants of a town, a countryside, or a province bearing presents of their own produce to the little Jesus and His parents. Barrels of wine, fish, fowls, sucking pigs, pastry, milk, fruit, birds in a cage—such are their gifts. Often there is a strongly satiric note: the peculiarities and weaknesses of individuals are hit off; the reputation of a place is suggested. A village whose people are famous for their stinginess is said to offer cider that is half rain water; elsewhere the

“ When in time of frost, Jesus Christ came into the world, the ass and ox warmed Him with their breath in the stable. How many asses and oxen I know in this kingdom of Gaul! How many asses and oxen I know who would not have done as much! ”

One cannot leave the songs of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries without some mention of its Latin hymnody. From a date near 1700 apparently, comes the sweet and solemn “Adeste fideles;” by its music and its

rhythm, perhaps, rather than by its actual words, become the best beloved of all Christmas hymns.

Across the Pyrenees from France, in Spain, the latest sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries marked a great output of Christmas verse. Among the chief writers were Juan Lopez de Ubeda, Francisco de Ocana and Jose de Valdevielso. Their verses remind one of the paintings of Murillo; they have the

our ills with his great power; His kingdom and signory are the world and the calm heavens; and now He sleeps in the hay."

Reverting to Italy, here are a few stanzas from the Bergamesque cradle song of the Blessed Virgin:

"In a porch full of cobwebs, between the mule and the ox, the Saviour of Souls is born . . . in the porch at Bethlehem are the Virgin and St. Joseph and the



French Village Children, Carolling

same facility, the same tender and graceful sentiment, without much depth. They lack the homely flavour, the quaintness that make the French and German folk-carols so delightful; they have not the rustic tang, and yet they charm by their simplicity and sweetness. Here are a few stanzas by Ocana:

"Within a poor manger and covered with hay lies Jesus of Nazareth. He rests between two animals who warm him from the cold. He who remedies

Child who lies in the cradle. In Bethlehem they touch fire, from the porch the flame issues, it is the star of heaven which has fallen into the straw. I am a poor gypsy, who came hither from Egypt, and bring to God's child a cock. I am a poor Galician and bring to God's child linen for a shift. To the newborn child all bring a gift. I am little and have nothing, I bring Him my heart."

That last sentence sums up, the world over, the true spirit of Christmas. "I bring Him my heart."